

TWO FALLACIES IN CHARLES TAYLOR'S *EXPLANATION OF BEHAVIOUR*

IN the discussion provoked by the appearance of this book (*e.g.* G. E. M. Anscombe, *New Statesman*, 5 February 1965, p. 206), it does not seem to have been remarked that two of the arguments central to Taylor's thesis are invalid.

1. The first argument (pt. 1, chap. 1, sec. 4, pp. 21-25) is used to support the assertion that a teleological explanation of the behaviour of a system is irreducible to, and hence precludes, a further causal explanation of that behaviour.

There is nothing wrong with the first part of the argument, which asserts that teleological explanation is characterised by an assumption of asymmetry; "In holding that the most basic laws are such that a sufficient condition of an event's happening is that it be required for a certain goal . . . teleological explanation places one result among those which are ideally possible for the system in a special position. For that the system achieves this result-condition neither calls for nor admits of explanation; but should it achieve any other condition, we are bound to give an account. . . . This is the basis for the distinction . . . between the 'natural' result and the 'unnatural' ones, that the two must be accounted for in quite different ways; that there exists, in other words, an asymmetry of explanation" (pp. 21-23).

What is wrong is Taylor's attempt to show that this asymmetry, while characteristic of pre-Galilean physical explanation, is incompatible with post-Galilean physical explanation. He recognises that the principle of inertia in Newtonian mechanics is *analogous* to a principle of asymmetry. Indeed the analogy is stated so clearly that Taylor's failure to recognise its completeness is almost incredible: "For Newton's first Law, the continuation of a body at rest or in uniform rectilinear motion did not admit of explanation in this sense, only changes in velocity were to be accounted for. Continued rest or rectilinear motion could be spoken of in this sense as 'natural'" (p. 23). Taylor's argument for the *disanalogy* is that the principle of inertia is 'neutral' in a way that a principle of asymmetry could not be, because "the Principle of Inertia does not single out any particular direction in which bodies 'naturally' tend to move or any constellation which they tend to move towards" (p. 23). But this is to invoke the literal (spatial) senses of 'direction' and 'constellation' when what is relevant is their metaphorical sense as "result-conditions that neither call for nor admit of explanation". In this sense, as Taylor admits, the principle of inertia *does* single out particular directions or constellations. Deviation from uniform rectilinear motion (including rest) is to be explained by the action of physical forces; continuance of such motion is not. All that has changed from pre- to post-Galilean is the 'natural' state that is taken not to need explaining. There has been no loss of asymmetry.

Since asymmetry in Taylor's sense is thus common to both teleological and Newtonian-mechanical explanation, it cannot serve as a ground of distinction between them. This argument for the irreducibility of the former to the latter is therefore invalid.

2. The second argument (pt. 1, chap. 3, sec. 1, p. 62) attempts to draw a distinction between an "intentional" and an "ordinary teleological system", to support the assertion that "the behaviour of a system to which 'action' and 'desire' can be attributed . . . cannot be accounted for by the ordinary form of teleological explanation", but demands in addition the special explanatory notion of intention.

The argument runs as follows. The behaviour of an ordinary teleological system S is describable by (teleological) laws relating S to the environment *as it is*, the "geographical environment", T. The behaviour of an intentional system S', however, is determined *not* by the environment as it is, but as it is *seen by*, or under "the intentional description of", S'. This is the "behavioural environment". The distinction is illustrated by a footnote citing the capacity of advanced organisms to "learn about their environment", so that the same organism may come to behave differently when repeatedly placed in the same T. This "adaptation", Taylor insists, could not take place in S, since the same laws relating the same system to the same environment must prescribe the same behaviour.

This argument rests on a pun between numerical and qualitative senses of 'same'. A law, teleological or not, relates *qualities* of the system to qualities of the environment. By 'same T', Taylor means: 'T same in relevant qualities.' By 'same system S', he means: 'numerically identical with S', and this is perfectly compatible with a change in the *qualities* of S. There is therefore no reason why a merely teleological system S should not behave differently on different occasions in the same geographical environment. The changes in behaviour will be explained quite straightforwardly by changes in those qualities of S involved in the laws describing its behaviour in such an environment T. The assertion that S cannot "adapt" to its environment, is simply false, and hence the distinction between S and the intentional system S' which can so adapt is illusory.

This conclusion may be illustrated by a commonplace instance of adaptive behaviour in a system which Taylor would probably not wish to call 'teleological', let alone 'intentional'. Consider a wire, S, stretched elastically according to Hooke's law by a weight T. S suffers work-hardening, *i.e.* the stretching becomes less on repeated applications of T. This may be describable in a perfectly law-like way, *e.g.* the Young's modulus, λ , of the wire may be some simple function of the total work done in past stretchings of the wire. In other words, S, numerically the same, undergoes change in a relevant quality, λ , between successive stretchings. Hence applying the same (Hooke's) law to the wire in the same geographical environment,

T, yields a correct prediction of different behaviour on different occasions. No doubt one *could* call this adaptive behaviour 'intentional', and distinguish a behavioural environment, T/ λ , but it seems needlessly pretentious.

In short, Taylor's conclusion, that such a situation (*a*) peculiarly characterises purposive systems, and (*b*) cannot be subsumed under teleological laws, is patently false in both respects. Miss Anscombe need not have been so surprised that Taylor "does not actually give any examples of candidates for the status 'teleological non-purposive'" (*loc. cit.*). The proposed distinction is non-existent, and the class defined by it is empty.

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